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ABSTRACT

Readers Theater, a combination of storytelling and dramatic elements, is recommended as a technique for use in the English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) classroom. Among its advantages are that it incorporates four language skill areas (Listening, speaking, reading, writing), uses cultural materials, and motivates students by using language in a communicative and authentic context. Its use is suggested for all age groups and skill levels, and requirements of the teacher are common sense and creativity. Scripts can be based on any material used in the classroom and readily adapted by students, the only limitation being that the topic or text must lend itself to creation of dialogue. Some examples of materials developed by students at the university level are offered. Three common methods of staging Readers Theater are described: non-theatrical (reading of scenes within a classroom group), and semi-theatrical (reading of scenes in front of a classroom group), and theatrical (using simple props, scenery, lighting, and music). The teacher can prepare pre-performance activities such as discussion of the author, cultural context, setting, dialect, or vocabulary. It is concluded that the method leads to a deeper appreciation of language, content, and the learning process. (MSE)

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The Use of Readers Theater in the EFL Curriculum

Readers Theater is a combination of storytelling and dramatic elements which can be of many different uses to EFL teachers. Among its benefits are the facts that it incorporates all four skill areas, utilizes cultural materials, and provides motivation for students by using language in a communicative and authentic context rather than merely in an academic setting. This technique can be used by the experienced as well as those new to the profession.

It is often thought that Readers Theater is only for children or can be used only by those with extensive theatrical experience. However, teachers who begin to use Readers Theater quickly find that adults have just as much fun as younger learners; common sense and creativity are the only prerequsites for successful incorporation of the teaching technique. Further misconceptions about Readers Theater include the beliefs that students must memorize their parts, that scripts are difficult to locate and adapt, and that a great deal of time and preparation are required to successfully execute this program. Conventional theatrical elements such as props and a stage are optional but not necessary. As illustrated here, teachers will realize that possible scripts exist in any material used in the classroom, and these scripts

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may quickly be adapted by the students and preformed soon afterwards The benefits of Readers Theater are not limited to those students with a high level of speaking proficiency; instead students of all levels can participate in this activity, involving the entire class.

Readers Theater provides an interactive way of introducing cultural knowledge and familiarization with the folklore and literature of the target language. Students can gain insight into a diverse range of cultural topics such as gender relationships, historical events and contexts, social conflicts, and contemporary issues. Readers Theater allows students to practice secondary aspects of linguistic competence including pronunciation, intonation, and the conveyance of emotional content via language. Further benefits can be observed in the affective sphere. Because students have scripts in hand, their confidence in delivering lines is reinforced. As a group activity, Readers Theater promotes cooperation between teachers and students, and the responsibility for success is shared equally by all members of the class. Social bonds are created while traditional barriers are broken down between students and teachers.

Finding a source of suitable scripts for Readers Theater may seem like a daunting prospect to many teachers.. However, even if a source book of decent scripts did exist, this may not be the best choice of material for students, simply because it may not relate to any of their current course work. The best place to look for scripts is right in the classroom itself. Novels, articles, debates, text book reading, and short stories can all provide excellent sources for scripts. These scripts may be extracted directly from the material, developed by the teacher, or (best of all) developed by the students themselves.

If a teacher happens to be using a play or dialogue, these are obviously adaptable into scripts for Readers Theater. The teacher or students merely need to edit the scripts into a suitable form which can be presented to the class. Five to ten minute scripts often work best. In editing these scripts, a narrator may be used to help introduce the scene, characters, and action.

In transforming books, articles, and texts into scripts, the only limitation would be that students must be working with literature that contains or lends itself to dialogue. Most novels abound with episodes of characters conversing. Students need only to choose a passage within the work where the number of characters they want to depict is present. The passage may then either be edited or embellished by the students to work the scene into a suitable form for presentation. The scene, written as a script, should be copied for each student who will participate in the group. These scripts can be mounted on colored cardboard for purposes of presentation.

For example, one script used by the students of the Intensive English Program at West Virginia University was developed from James Thurber's (1945)"The Unicorn in the Garden". In the actual text, the scene appears as follows:

> When the police and the psychiatrist arrived they sat down in chairs and looked at her, with great interest, "My husband," she said, "saw a unicorn this morning." The police looked at the psychiatrist and the psychiatrist looked at the police. "He told me it ate a lily," she said... "He told me it had a golden horn in the middle of it forehead," she said. At a solemn signal from the psychiatrist the police leaped from their chairs and seized the wife. (268-269)

Because of time restrictions, the teacher reworked the scene into the following dialogue:

Wife - My husband saw a unicorn this morning.

Psychiatrist - Really?

Wife - He told me it ate a lily.

Psychiatrist- How interesting!

Wife - He told me it had a golden horn in the middle of its forehead.

Psychiatrist - I see.

Narrator - The psychiatrist leaped from his chair and siezed the wife.

If time allows, however, it is always better to let the students rewrite the scene. When Readers Theater was used in the ESL Program at WVU, students worked in groups to develop their own scenes from the novel they were currently studying. One such scene taken from Pat Conroy's (1986) Prince of Tides is:

Mr. Newbury - Why did you hit my son? (blowing smoke toward Tom)

Todd - He and his brother ambushed me in the schoolyard, Dad. I was just walking by minding my own business, when his brother jumped me from behind and this one started hitting me in the face.

Mr. Newbury - Why didn't your brother come to apologize too? I never liked two against one.

Tom - Why do you want to lie about it, Todd? You know Luke wasn't anywhere near when all of that happened. Besides, Luke wouldn't have needed me. He could eat you alive boy, and you know it. (p 233)

Ready made scripts, even if available, will not be as useful to students as developing scripts of their own. In developing these scripts, students cultivate different aspects of writing such as summarizing, editing, and creative writing.

Performance of Readers Theater does not necessarily involve weeks of preparation, intricate costumes, or expensive scenery; in fact, only minimal direction is required. The staging of scenes may be classified into three types: non-theatrical, semi-theatrical, and theatrical. In any format audience participation can play an integral role; the audience can be called upon to become involved through repetition of key phrases or sounds at intervals throughout the script, creating a dynamic interaction between performers and viewers.

Non-theatrical staging is probably the most common type of Readers Theater. ESL teachers may even be employing it now without realizing it. In this type students read scenes while seated among their fellow students. There is no separation of actor and audience. High school English classes studying Shakespeare tend to use this type of Readers Theater extensively. Students may be called upon to read various characters with little or no preparation time.

Semi-theatrical staging is almost as easy as non-theatrical Readers Theater, but may require a larger amount of preparation on the students' part. For this type of staging, students read the scene standing or seated in front of an audience (the classroom). The students may choose to read facing the audience full front, facing the character with whom they are speaking, or facing away from the audience when not actually involved in the scene.

Theatrical staging is the most involved of the three types of staging, but it is also the staging students enjoy most. This type of staging employs simple props, costumes, scenery, lighting, and music. Students' creativity is facilitated and their imaginations are engaged. Productions of this sort can be videotaped for later viewing by the class or staged outside of the usual class period so that other members of the school or outside community may attend.

Once a manageable script has been agreed upon, rehearsal can begin. Students are advised to read through their scripts in class as well as outside of class for practice in pronunciation, intonation, and clarity of speech. Students are coached as to body movements and gestures by teacher and classmates. Often a teacher may desire to precede the Readers Theater unit with a variety of pre-activities such as discussion of the author, cultural context, setting, dialect, or vocabulary-building exercises. These types of pre-activities build comprehension of the text itsself and may assist the students in deciding how exactly they would like to portray their characters

Readers Theater is a motivating technique which allows students to practice language in a unique way. Students gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of both the content and the language of the text at hand while simultaneously drawing upon their listening, speaking, and reading facilities. Furthermore, writing exercises such as short compositions are possible as follow-up activities. Readers Theater is as accessible to beginning level as to advanced level students; the difference lies merely in the selection of texts. Once this technique has been made use of in the EFL classroom, teachers and students will find that leads to a deeper appreciation of language, content, and the process of learning.